MOOCs and Libraries: Many Hats, Many Questions

by Ashley E. Faulkner

In light of their ubiquitous presence today, it is easy to forget: even if you date back to the first use of the term, MOOCs (massive open online courses) are only six years old. If you date to the popularization of the form, MOOCs' breakthrough moment didn't come until two Stanford professors offered one such course on artificial intelligence in 2012 and over one hundred and sixty *thousand* people around the world registered.[1] That same year saw the inception of popular MOOC platforms, including Coursera and Udacity, the former having since registered over four million users.[2] In light of this limited time frame and rapid rate of growth, it is perhaps not surprising that scholarly research regarding MOOCs is relatively sparse; while there has been some attention paid to the pedagogy and instructors of MOOCs, there is, as of yet, very little research into the role of libraries and librarians within this movement.[3]

The very definition of a "massive open online course" is still evolving. MOOCs are a part of the evolution of online education, but are distinguished from other online education offerings by their unprecedented size and open enrollment policies. Traditionally, the only requirement for registration for these "open" courses was access to a computer and an Internet connection, but many MOOC platforms have begun to add for-cost components, so this distinction is increasingly ambiguous. MOOCs are generally developed by well-known experts in various academic disciplines and associated with prestigious universities. Students are often grouped into cohorts so classes begin and end on set dates, allowing for active discussion, though work is completed asynchronously. Many MOOC platforms have also begun to include tools to encourage virtual or even in-person meet-ups in order to build a deeper sense of community among learners.[4] It is worth noting, though, that while the very first MOOCs were driven by connectivist pedagogy, emphasizing truly "crowd-sourced learning," most MOOCs today are strongly instructivist in the vein of the educational mainstream, meaning they tend towards a more traditional, strongly lecturer-led format.[5] Overall, while MOOCs may lack the interaction, mentoring and higher-level assessment available through in-person courses, they are generally considered a solid means of content delivery.[6]

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The continuing evolution of characteristics, and in particular the recent shift in pedagogy, could potentially explain why speculation has exploded in the past year regarding the future of MOOCs and the role they will play in higher education in the coming decades. MOOCs may wear many potential hats, but one of the grandest and most pondered predictions is that MOOCs may one day all but entirely replace traditional, brick-and-mortar universities. A number of universities already allow students to earn college credit for MOOCs, which seems the logical first step in a progression to MOOC course tracks and eventually full degrees earned via MOOCs.[7]

Whether or not this is truly a feasible future remains to be seen. On one hand, the U.S. Department of Education summarized its review of relevant research literature by concluding that, "online learning appears to be as effective as conventional classroom instruction."[8] Last year, the American Council on Education reviewed five Coursera courses and recommended them all for

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college credit. Additionally, it is well documented that, when students are given the option of video lecture videos, student attendance at live lectures declines; this indicates that students seem to perceive in-person and virtual offerings as roughly equivalent.[9] On the other hand, MOOCs have notoriously high attrition rates, averaging around 90%, and a number of incidents have highlighted the question of whether those who complete courses have truly mastered the material.[10]

Breaking away from traditional classroom comparisons, MOOCs are also frequently hailed as a means to "democratize education," and are considered potential ongoing innovators in the field of continuing education for professionals. In some respects, MOOCs do allow for democratization due to their minimal cost and ubiquity; however, while they do have a global reach, MOOCs' impact across various demographics is questionable. Indeed, research suggests the majority of MOOC students have already completed higher-level academic study, are currently studying in the field, or have a professional affiliation to their subject area prior to registering.[11] If this is so, MOOCs may not be democratizing education, although their role as continuing education innovators seems assured. Others argue the recent decline in MOOC registration and interest after two years of growth is because of a shift in demographics, as academics and professionals have satisfied their initial curiosity related to MOOCs and are now considering the best means of utilizing these courses within their respective institutions. This may prompt either resurgence in continuing education or a demographic shift away from the professionals that were taking these courses to the students that academics teach or that professionals may want to hire.[12]

MOOCs also potentially have two large, non-pedagogical roles to play. The first is providing an unprecedented research and data mining opportunity. As well as providing a natural laboratory to "experiment with pedagogical methods on a vast scale," the rapidity of MOOC adoption and the clear-cut transition to distinct, new services provides researchers with a unique opportunity to conduct comparative studies.[13] In her paper "MOOCs: An Opportunity for Innovation and Research" Sarah M. Pritchard suggests that librarians, for example, could study "different bibliographic instruction approaches in the same exact class, one on campus and one via a MOOC; or one via existing small-group online delivery versus later in a MOOC."[14] The general expectation is that the abundant data collected by MOOC platforms will compliment these field studies, and indeed be the impetus for more and further studies into learner behavior.[15] Of course, we must remember the competitive and for-profit nature of these platforms, which may make them reluctant to share any data that could have a potential competitive purpose, including demographics and detailed learner analytics.

For librarians, the biggest non-pedagogical role of MOOCs is their ideal position to promote open access resources. MOOCs present a bevy of copyright and licensing challenges unlike those in traditional classroom settings. The applicability of the fair use rationale is questionable, given the for-profit nature of many MOOC platforms, their international scope, and their unprecedented scale.[16] Consequently, faculty who create MOOCs often run into difficulty with copyright restrictions on materials they wish to carry over from in-person courses. This provides librarians with potential "teaching moments" wherein open access alternatives to traditional publishing can be discussed, addressing one of the greatest challenges librarians have thus far faced in the open access transition: convincing faculty to publish in open access outlets themselves.[17] It is possible that once they realize they cannot even use their own work in a MOOC context without haggling, faculty may be more receptive to a conversation about the importance of open access journals and repositories.

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Librarians involved in MOOCs also should remember: MOOCs not only disperse content, they also create it. As students are encouraged to discuss and remix provided information, they are co-creators of content that could also be open access.[18] Librarians should ensure that licenses with MOOC platforms providers are non-exclusive and that their open access policy applies to the content created both for and by MOOCs.[19]

While librarians have not had a strong formative role in the MOOC movement to date, this does not preclude such a role moving forward, and already librarians are playing strong supporting roles in MOOC creation and implementation. Currently, librarians participating in MOOCs are cast in the role of consultants, mainly leading discussions in copyright considerations, licensing negotiation, and traditional library instruction. MOOCs continue to highlight the issue of whether current copyright law is adequate and appropriate in our increasingly digital and open world. For now, though, we all work within the existing legal framework, and for librarians working with MOOCs, this has meant copyright-clearing works and helping faculty find and locate alternative resources when this

is not possible or when we have an open access teaching moment. Unfortunately, this is a time-consuming role; Coursera, for example, estimates an average of 380 staff hours in order to copyright-clear the materials for each individual MOOC. This situation highlights one of the looming questions librarians will need to answer moving forward: How do we balance our commitment to serving our traditional patrons, with this additional, and potentially vast, new patron body?[20]

The bigger question, though, may be: do traditional library services need to evolve in order to even consider serving hundreds of thousands of new users? We must walk a careful line in considering that even "at reduced traditional service levels, MOOC students could quickly overwhelm a library," but if we do not participate in MOOCs moving forward we may "reinforce the idea some students have that libraries are no longer a necessary part of education."[21] Currently, suggestions for a balanced approach include supplying modified online resources, such as resource guides, FAQ pages, self-paced tutorials, and contact information, such as an email address more than one librarian will be responsible for monitoring, as opposed to personal contact information, as one librarian alone could be quickly consumed by requests for assistance.[22]

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There are likely some MOOCs that do not require much librarian support, such as those focused on very specific skill sets, but for the most part library instruction, particularly information literacy instruction, is even more important in the online-only MOOC environment.[23] As students are left on their own to find, analyze, and use online materials, information literacy skills become absolutely crucial, as they will be for the rest of students' lives. While traditional instruction methods are likely impractical, librarians should lobby for the inclusion of general online library tutorials or information literacy skills self-assessment tools to be included in MOOCs. Additional difficulties may still arise, however, due to the global reach of MOOCs; learners' background knowledge and existing information literacy skills may be irreconcilably different and they may require assistance twenty-four hours a day as time zones come into play.[24] Yet, an information literacy component appears essential in the MOOC environment as plagiarism concerns, in particular, have plagued the movement.[25]

Of course, some argue information literacy skills will become moot in this environment as an a la carte system develops between publishers and MOOC platforms or MOOC professors. Already some MOOC platforms, such as Coursera, are in talks with publishers to make selected materials available to MOOC students for the duration of the course, with the expectation from the publisher that these students might buy the materials at the conclusion of the course.[26] While most publishers have not embraced this potential avenue for advertising, Elsevier donated page images of a complete textbook to a computer science HarvardX MOOC, with a closely associated link to the Amazon purchasing page, and saw sales of the book increase 2,000 percent over the MOOC dates.[27] While such innovations in licensing may be welcome in some regards, the larger impact on information literacy skills could be disastrous if students are prompted and expected to use only these provided resources.

In addition to offering a la carte licensing, some MOOCs deal with the issue of providing information resources by neither providing nor requiring any. While either providing all course resources or requiring no resources are both approaches that arguably obscure the role of libraries, the more pressing concern is the implicit disregard for information literacy skills; if students are not expected or required to use any resources beyond the MOOC, then they, indeed, have no need to gain or enhance information literacy skills within this environment. Unfortunately, they will still need these skills beyond the MOOC environment. Information literacy skills are not academic skills; they are life skills. The casual dismissal of information literacy in this context is chilling and an indication that librarians need to continue outreach and education regarding information literacy, especially in our increasingly open environment.

In determining how libraries and librarians should position themselves in the MOOC movement moving forward, the first question may be to determine whether MOOCs are a fad or a trend. A fad fizzles out, whereas a trend is enduring and leaves a lasting impact. However, libraries, similar to the institutions they serve, find themselves in the situation where they cannot afford to be left out of the movement now, regardless of the future. For higher education institutes, "MOOCs are like movie trailers for universities," and the intense media attention focused on MOOCs, hype or not, is such that universities may miss out on valuable media exposure if they're not offering MOOCs or participating in the conversation.[28] Likewise, libraries may wish to be more involved in MOOCs as a matter of increasing their overall exposure and perceived relevance to their campus community. Furthermore, if MOOCs *are* here to stay, many issues will be more efficiently navigated

if libraries can begin to influence the conversation, and eventually university policies, at this point in time.

Most of this article, and most of the discussion of libraries' roles in the MOOC movement, has focused on academic libraries, but public libraries should bear in mind that one potential future for MOOCs is a growing emphasis on continuing education. If MOOCs become less academic and more vocational, students may be looking towards their local public libraries for resources and guidance.[29] Again, it is better to consider these possibilities and plan for them than to panic at a point-of-need moment.

So what are some practical steps librarians can take right now to address this concern? The first and simplest is to sign up for a MOOC! Experiencing MOOCs from the learner perspective will give librarians a better personal idea of what MOOCs are and where libraries may play a role. Next, dive into the conversation. Talk with your peers, with educators, and with the communities you serve. This conversation would be enhanced by more scholarly research into MOOCs, and more research into the role of libraries and librarians in MOOC development and delivery. Lastly, if your institution is already involved in MOOCs, or is considering getting involved, strive to be included in the development phase so expectations of future library support are realistic. While it is considered a best practice to include librarians in MOOC project teams, we must actually implement this suggested practice. We are an irreplaceable voice in this conversation, and if nothing else, that's the hat we can wear right now.

Notes

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